

# "KAKUMA, THE MOST INVISIBLE REFUGEE SUCCESS STORY INSIDE AFRICA"

**By special life investigator  
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Analysis and commentary.**

## **KAKUMA; From Grass-to-Grace**

The once bushy and little known dusty township of Turkana west named KAKUMA, has gradually invested in untold vital human interest resources that would propel vibrant media establishment, to focus on quality coverage and effective dissemination of contents far and broad.

Kakuma crossed to the international spotlight on the 15<sup>th</sup> day, of August 1992, when an understanding was reportedly reached between stake holders, on how a camp should be established to accommodate Asylum seekers and refugees from across Africa. The natives of Kakuma commonly known as Turkana, exhibited affordable support and hospitality right from the start.

However, over the decades Kakuma has had little or no media attention as it should have been of a place blessed with high profile international activity. Activities in the camp and host community, have not been reasonably reflected at local, national and/or international media to match the growth and development of Kakuma.

Kakuma Refugee camp is now the home to over one hundred and fifty thousand asylum seekers and refugees, above its holding capacity of one hundred thousand refugees (100,000) only.

“This camp is now busting, we have about one hundred and twenty thousand refugees above the officially accepted sealing of one hundred thousand. UNHCR should do something” warns, the governor of Turkana County His. Excellency NANOK JOSPHAT, while officiating as chief guest during the inauguration of LOKADO new office block recently.

The camp has fourteen (14) primary schools, two secondary schools serving both refugees and Kenyans indiscriminately. Through UNHCR, a modern girls boarding secondary school has been donated and under construction within Kakuma Refugee camp, ready open by early 2014.

The school will be managed by Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and monitored by the Government of Kenya.

“We have a big problem in the camp , each teacher has about one hundred forty five (145). Students per class room” explains, a camp teacher who declined to be named.

The camp has one hospital with four (4) Health clinics, placed within zonal outreach and an out patients department (OPD) at the main refugee hospital. Three ambulances with one reportedly in dangerous mechanical condition (DMC). At the host community, there is one hospital under catholic mission establishment. The Government of Kenya has no Hospital establishment within Kakuma.

Kakuma has no abattoir despite ending lives of about 200 animals daily.

The township has no garbage dumpsite. The only unplanned Nakoyo dumpsite, situate 3 kilometers on Kakuma- Lokichogio- Highway, almost triggered conflict between UNHCR and the community of Nakoyo, a small village in Kakuma, recently. “We suffer from air pollution and our children reach out to the misplaced dumpsite for used condoms, used syringes, expired drugs, underpants and used sanitary pads. It's common to find children play with used condoms as footballs” explains, a group of teachers from Nakoyo primary school. The host community has no dumpsite as well “please stop throwing paper bags all over. We are soon to identify an official dumpsite for Kakuma” says, the district officer One Mr. Osodo Samuel, while officiating at Barasa Park meeting recently.

The host community has a population of about seventy thousand (70,000). Given the above description of Kakuma, we herein proceed to serve in bits and pieces reasons Kakuma should not be alienated from media coverage. A reluctant walk throughout Kakuma , be it camp or host community would reveal stagnation of uncountable development projects around the dusty and wealthy township of Turkana West.

The township has an upcoming news letter, published by Film Aid International and several notice boards around the camp areas” we have total information black out. The news letter and notice boards are not enough sources for information out lets here in Kakuma” explains, a student of Tarach Secondary school. Water scarcity and wood fuel are some of the frontline issues.

We are aware that some characters herein deserve protective coverage by way of not running names or photographs. We shall therefore, narrate and describe situation to keep you abreast with what goes on in and around Kakuma refugee camp (KRC) which has for decades suffered under the weight of total information blackout.

As we move on, you will find this special humanitarian article more revealing, educative, and

informative among other positive outcomes. Its considered request that you read the parts consistently so as to keep abreast with all issues surrounding refugees in Africa and beyond.

Our team of undercover analysts and feature writers lift herein what others ignored for over two decades.(23years)

Additionally, we traced the origin of Kakuma Refugee Camp (KRC) establishment, citing the fall of Kapoeta in South Sudan, May, 1992 from SPLA to Al-Bashers' Soldiers.

According to reliable source cum an eye witness. "It was at night when people started running towards Narus, fleeing from Kapoeta to join some sixteen thousand minors (children) who were under the care of Narus Catholic Church. The number increased drastically with adults joining the group. There were other unplanned relocation from Narus to Lokichiogio, the nearest boarder town" explains, the source who declined to be named.

The first organization to have rescued them was UNICEF, after that UNHCR got involved.

However, the issue of border situation and aerial bombing became an agenda at hand, which prompted acquisition of a new site for camp establishment. Kakuma inwardly located within the republic of Kenya, became a number one choice for a reception centre and temporary camp establishment. It offered security, and reasonable level of hospitality to the new arrivals.

Since then, the image of Kakuma has changed from local to national and now more global, without clear visibility and adequate Media attention to match the level of activity being performed in the area under closed curtain arrangements. In other words, seeing a serious journalist in Kakuma would somehow amount to a 'midnight dream'.

The locals are reportedly uncomfortable with journalists, knowing that many under cover transactions would reach out to the public domain and attract response not limited to Taxation and Legality. There are, reportedly, sections of NGOs that operate without proper registration certificates and they hide beneath the wings of big weight NGOs " we know them. They come here to gain platform by working under the umbrella of these spacious NGOs, let them be there, we shall soon carry out inspections to flash them out" Narrates a government official who declined to be named.

### **THE SECRET BEHIND BUSINESS BOOM IN KRC.**

As the saying goes "there is no vision without pro-vision" this time around, we herein serve in bits and pieces some ingredients responsible for the speedy growth and development of Informal trade right in the heart of Kakuma Refugee Camp (KRC) in Turkana west, Turkana County, Kenya-Africa

Traditionally, nearly all refugee Agencies in Africa do not provide cash money to new arrivals

and mandate refugees as well. A situation that has propelled business creativity and individual sense of survival among refugees.

“On arrival, we are offered some food and none food items. There is strictly no cash money issued to Asylum seekers or refugees” explains, an old lady from Somali community- KRC. This none cash strategy has empowered section of refugees and /or asylum seekers to become creative in the sense of business formation, growth and development.

“They say, to make money, start with what you see or what you have in place” explains, a young business man in KRC. In the case of refugees or asylum seekers, the nearest items for trade are the food ration or none food items offered right at the reception center.

“You can start by selling all what you have been issued and slowly save to invest in more stock” explains another refugee in KRC. Over the years, a batter trade linkage has developed between refugees and Nationals. Refugees supply food items and none food items in exchange for charcoal or wood fuel ferried from 100kms inside the Turkana world, where trees are practically countable.

“We offer wheat flour, maize flour, and salt in exchange for charcoal and other items. Situation is not normal, we do not see money in these arrangements. It has been like this for decades now” narrates a miserable refugee in KRC. However, some refugees, especially those from Somali, DRC, South Sudan, are now millionaires with string of business establishments linking the Camp with outside world.

“I feel comfortable now. Remember I arrived in Kakuma with only a shirt and pair of trousers, but now, even my eyes cannot believe what is in place” explains, a proud refugee. Kakuma refugee Camp has over 36 M-pesa out lets, reportedly 3 unlabelled banks facilitating business transactions internationally, entertainment centers, food Joints, and video halls scattered within gazetted zones. The business boom in KRC has had negative impact on the progress of business activities within Kakuma Host business center. Three months ago, Kakuma modern market was under key and lock due to lack of traders at the market, prompting local authorities to forcibly issue date line for all traders to acquire stalls or risk withdrawal of trade licence.

“The County Council is losing revenues to the camp booming business. Now all vehicles from Kitale drive direct to the camp. This must stop so as to save the county council investments” explains, an official who preferred not to be named. Another line of trade rocking KRC is sales and distribution of illicit brews within the camp and in the host community as well.

“We are finished. Let the Government of Kenya and UNHCR help to stop this ugly trade. You see people moving like zombies. They start drinking as early as 6am in the morning. Oh, my God!” explains a young lady. Mean while, the Kenya police has sustained operations to stamp out production, sales and consumption of illicit brews.

In the months of October and November 2013, dozens of refugees were reportedly arrested by the Kenya police and urged to pay fines or face jail sentence. “It’s a good move by the Kenya Government but, they got to understand that we are idle and drinking is part of our business in Kenya. Let them provide us with what to do” a tough speaking man states.

However, the Police concern and action is gradually yielding fruits as the number of drunkards fallen by the roadsides have drastically decreased, especially around Baghdad where local breweries are reportedly well established.

### **SANITATION COVERAGE IN KAKUMA A SHARED SHAME**

In real estates, growth and development, the component of sanitation and /or toilet facilities are Vital. It has to be developed or constructed prior to the construction of other components such as office units, kitchen units, boardroom, among other components. The line of thought is that even the workmen at the construction site will need toilet facility to answer calls of nature. In Kakuma township, sanitation news is regrettable in that, Kakuma has very poor sanitation coverage with some areas reading zero coverage.

“ Its heap of shame, when you move out of the township 200 Meters, you need a broom to keep sweeping your way through, practically there are piles and piles of human feaces” explains, a young lady resident in Kakuma Township. In the township of Kakuma, some established business premises do not have toilet facilities as it should have been.

In this category is Kakuma Fm Station (names withheld on request) which has been conducting business for months without construction of a pit Latrine“ the biggest shame is that this Fm station is backed by IOM, Government of Japan and Government of Kenya. How would the authorities invest so much funds in a housing complex without being mindful of toilet facilities or sanitation in general” explains, a concerned resident of Kakuma.

Interacting with some support staff at the station, they argue that “truly, we do not have toilet facilities and all we do is around that bush, this area is very rocky that’s why they have not been able to construct a toilet”.

The multimillion IOM and Government of Japan complex has constant water supplies as opposed to other areas where water is extremely scarce.“ These organizations are not serious. How do they offer all these to the community and deny them sanitation facilities?” asks, an old man, resident of Kakuma.

“Sincerely these people are blessed, they even have constant water supplies but have failed to construct wash rooms.” Explains, a support staff. The nearest toilet facilities are at Kakuma modern market where 10ksh is paid for the service upon access.

On the other hand the camp has very good sanitation coverage, every homestead boasts of a permanent pit latrine and good drainage systems. Above all, refugees seem to understand the usefulness of good sanitation coverage and they do get support from international/national organizations such as NRC, NCKK and UNHC

### **KAKUMA HIT BY UNMARKED GRAVES.**

The over two decades long establishment of Kakuma refugee camp (KRC) has left a land mark of about 5 huge burial grounds with four (4) already sealed and one operational at an over drive speed. Something unusual is that, nearly all graves are not marked or engraved with particulars of deceased refugees as it was in 1993 and other early days of refugees’ arrival in Kakuma. “We have problems of identification; nearly all graves look the same. When relatives start tracing, they find it hard to establish who was buried where.” Explains, a group of elders in KRC.

In the burial ground adjacent to Kakuma town, some graves are seen raised and well labeled with particulars of the deceased in the rank of engineers and doctors. “Things have changed. We no longer receive burial materials from agencies as we used to” says, an old man.

The unmarked graves and rough burials of refugees signal issues of accountability right from the registration of an asylum seeker to the time he is lowered to his /her unmarked grave. “Its pity, some refugees have died but-UNHCR is not aware” Explains, a young man who declined to be named. If burial of refugees are under sanitation programs then it’s important refugees or asylum seekers are sensitized on what they should expect.

“We do not understand the role of UNHCR when death of a refugee occurs. Who is supposed to help the community?” asks, a group of elders in KCR. Speaking to one of the camp lawyers, he says, “For sure, I’m not aware of unmarked graves in this camp, which is news to me”. Another area of concern is that of compensation when refugees or asylum seekers die due to negligence of an agent (UNHCR- AGENT). “UN should educate us about our rights as refugees. We are being taken for a ride” says, an unhappy refugee in KRC. There is a slogan that says “refugees are real people” and if so, real people must be buried decently and with dignity. “If UN spends so much on a refugee when he /she is still alive, what stops UN from doing the same at death of a refugee?” Asks, a resident of KRC

## **KAKUMA NOT GOOD DESTINATION FOR COMMERCIAL SEX.**

Unlike food stuff and other items, which are on high demand in this dusty township, commercial sex workers regret their journeys to this small world of plenty.

“This place called Kakuma is so expensive and the people are very proud. They do not spend money on outings and romance generally” explains, a sex worker, disgusted with the little income Kakuma offers her.

The night life in Kakuma is very restrictive in that those working for international NGO’S are not allowed to move aimlessly at night, and access to their compound an uphill task.

“These men and women are hard to befriend. . We blame institutional restrictions that has over the years, developed high levels of despline in this guys” explains, another sex worker resident of Kakuma.

Section of people working in Kakuma are also powerful in the sense that they once in a while take air-ride to Nairobi or other towns for relaxation. “We suffer from class differences as well. These guys have families in Nairobi and they look down upon us” explains, a disappointed sex worker. Locally, Kakuma sex trade is at as low as 30ksh. “Sex is the cheapest thing in Kakuma. You can make love to someone at as low as 30ksh. People do not bother about HIV/AIDS. Instead they fear pregnancy” explains, an officer, Managing HIV/AIDS programs in Kakuma. Meanwhile female condoms are being misused, with many youthful Turkana girls using the rings for either ear rings or bangles on the hands.

Institutional restriction in Kakuma has shaped the township to the standards of self discipline. At 11pm all lights are off and police kick off with routine patrol. If found idle along the narrow paths; the police got to provide you with an overnight accommodation at the police cells. By six (6pm) KRC is closed and no one is expected to either move in or out. The police in Kakuma are very effective, efficient and well facilitated by UNHCR and the Government of Kenya. “We are working properly, thanks to the UNHCR for adequate facilitation” says the Officer Commanding Police Division (OCPD) Turkana west, Mr. Jonathan Ngala, while briefing the press on the state of Kakuma security recently.

Meanwhile, an organization called NCKK has stepped up campaigns in line with Adolescents sexual and reproductive Health which will address issues of young people in the Camp, such as teenage pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, Sexually transmitted deceases among other issues. "Generally, Kakuma is not a good destination for commercial Sex. When reaching up here, be prepared to look for employment with the international NGO’s” explains, an old man from the host community.

## **KAKUMA HIT BY NON- PERFORMING DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS**

Whereas many communities around the World are requesting donors to support them with funds for viable development projects, in KAKUMA, some donors have provided huge funds under very regrettable strategies and doubtful community capability or capacity to manage such projects. Community members have never had the slightest history of program success or management. The donors have never bothered to sensitize or prepare communities to appreciate that whatever is donated to them amounts to tax payers funds in other countries like America, Europe, Japan and elsewhere.

Combing through sections of non-performing projects in Kakuma, especially those already under key and lock, would prompt some serious local leadership to warn donors on many issues not limited to feasibility exercises. Imposing huge projects on uninformed community, amounts to creation of slow but timely community conflict or preparing community members for known jail sentence over issues of corruption and/or mismanagement of community resources.

As we move on, let's review the performance of Energy Centre Kakuma, where the international organization for immigration (IOM) , Government of Japan and Government of Kenya have either funded or implemented in the development of a multi-million Energy Project, which has failed to perform or even impress the community.

At the energy centre kakuma, computer training programs have also closed down, with computers now locked in huge cases. The solar panels and power systems are not professionally maintained, putting entire community at upper risk when lightning strikes. Three months back, two huge signage(s) were erected at the non-performing centre, only to the amusement of on – lookers. The signage displays logos of IOM, GK, GoJ. Kakuma Energy Centre Complex would earn about 150,000Ksh monthly rental income but it's now empty and ghost like. Energy centre members are now nursing professional embarrassment and heap of shame. . The other untold shame is that these donors invested so much in the energy complex forgetting that toilet or sanitation is vital component of the energy project. To-date, Kakuma Energy Centre has no Toilet facility and no clue as to when someone will pick a hoe to give helping hands.

More still, if energy centre is well managed, the power source would supply Kakuma for over 18hours daily .and as a community property the donors should learn to instill good evaluation and monitoring strategies to tame some corrupt officials at community setting.

What is going on at the Kakuma energy centre, disseminates a global shame since the names of Japan government, Kenya government and international organization for immigration are at the display.



“We do not have toilet simply because the constructors forgot” states, a young man at the centre. The community should review their agenda and re- elect some officials who have attained certain levels of Education. The community should also open doors for equal opportunity employment so that those qualified apply for jobs” remarks, some elders at the centre. Energy centre is one of the many projects which have miserably failed in Kakuma to the disappointment of Japan government, IOM, Kenya government, and some other key stake holders.

## **ARE REFUGEES A LIABILITY OR UNIQUE ASSET FOR UN AGENCIES**

For over two decades now, thousands of refugees have been recruited, engaged and employed by some UN agencies, as incentive workers, under very shallow employment contracts, and earning about 4,500ksh ( roughly USD 18 only) as monthly take to the camp pay. The USD18 monthly pay can only help transport a worker from camp to the work place for about 21 days, at the rate of 300 Ksh daily Boda -Boda return pay (journey by motor cycle taxi).

However, to understand the situation better, our sharp writer has had a one-on- one field contact with some refugees involved in various positions ( incentive work) within the UN agencies in Kakuma refugee camp (KRC), recently. “I feel we are being exploited by the UN-agencies. The incentive pay of 4,500 Ksh is a laughable matter and professional abuse if not professional rape during day time” explains, a young lawyer working as an incentive worker.

“This to me, is the highest level of exploitation by the international NGO’s but, our people have failed to see and protect us against exploitation” explains, another young lawyer involved in causal work at the UN compound, in Kakuma. Many international NGO’s thrive at the expenses of cheap workforce from refugees and Asylum seekers in Kenya.

“The difference between slavery and what is going on here is very thin” Observes, a young historian involved in NGO work as well. However, employment of under qualified refugees to run some UN refugee programs have not only led to none performance but also to complete downfall of certain programs, especially those in the Health sector and education.

“These people must understand that competent human resource is vital in the functions, proper running and management of other resources” explains, a teacher at the camp It is good that at every Primary School there are 4 Kenyans who are qualified teachers and the rest are refugees no matter qualified or not. “Most importantly, we are now aware that we are being held in Kakuma for decades to provide cheaper workforce for mainly international organizations” says, a young refugee professional at KRC.

There are cases where privately owned companies are accused of exploiting refugees and nationals as well. “MELECH COMPANY LIMITED, based in Nairobi has reportedly not paid workers and suppliers who helped to construct two spacious distribution centers, One and Three” says, a group of private welders and refugees, employed as incentive workers. However, efforts to reach the management of MELECH for comment , were fruitless.

The incentive workforce under UN arrangement has also distorted human resource productivity, growth and development in many aspects. Most refugees can no longer perform to their expectation knowing that organizations do have hidden agenda not limited to the exploitation of Energetic African human resources under the cover of pursuing humanitarian work.

Therefore, refugees are a unique asset to the UN agencies other than liability. But still, depending on refugees as employees is a grave mistake being committed by the UN Agencies in Kakuma and may be, elsewhere around Africa. Let UN Agencies understand that Refugees are Beneficiaries of UN programs. It's not professional for UN agencies to allow refugees or asylum seekers work on their own case files. Finally, holding refugees to work for about 10 years as incentive workers is a unique professional mistake UN agencies are writing. Remember refugees are beneficiaries of UN programs globally. For UN activities to run smoothly, let them employ qualified job seekers from the huge job markets around the world.

However, Kakuma refugee camp is a huge refugee success story that has eluded golden attention of frontline and/or international media inside Africa. We found it necessary and in human interest to serve you what others ignored for decades. Thank you for taking your time to comb through this hot journalistic piece of work.....Asante Sana.

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